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ABSTRACT

A family in which at least one adult has a child prior to the couple's marriage is termed a stepfamily. Although approximately 50 million Americans are members of stepfamilies, there is little research on the nature of stepfamily life. Most authors have projected the stepfamily as a deviant family form, beset with problems and conflict, and less able to provide the appropriate child rearing environment. Reports from stepparents reflect perceptions of being religiously unsanctioned, legally powerless, and socially denied. However, the stepfamily may be viewed as part of a natural evolution of family life, a reorganization of disrupted family units to accomodate the emotional needs of existing members. While differing in structure from the nuclear family, stepfamilies need not differ along critical dimensions related to healthy family functioning. The necessary tasks in stabilizing the family unit involve establishing appropriate role models, redefining financial and social obligations, establishing consistent leadership for children across households, making custody and visitation arrangements, dispelling myths, and maintaining emotional bonds. (Author/WAS)

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STEPPING IN

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA, March 23-26, 1983.

Abstract

The paper is the third part of the symposium "Disrupted and Reorganized Families" presented at 1983 SEPA.

A family in which at least one adult has a child prior to the couple's marriage is termed a stepfamily. Although approximately 50 million Americans are either stepparents or stepchildren, there has been a paucity of research on the nature of stepfamily life. The majority of authors have projected the stepfamily as a deviant family form, berate with problems and conflict, and less able to provide the appropriate child rearing environment. Reports from stepparents reflect perceptions of being religiously unsanctioned, legally powerless and socially denied. The paper highlights the existing stepfamily literature and focuses upon the necessary tasks in stabilizing the unit: establishing appropriate role models, redefining financial and social obligations, establishing consistent leadership for children across households, arranging custody and visitation arrangements, dispelling myths, and maintaining emotional bonds.

The author views the stepfamily as part of a natural evolution of family life. As family units are disrupted, they reorganize to accommodate the emotional support needs of existing members. Stepfamily units may differ in structure from the nuclear family, however they need not differ along the critical dimensions related to healthy family functioning.

Third section of a three part presentation "Disruption and Reorganization of the Family" delivered at Southeastern Psychological Association, March 25, 1983, Atlanta, Georgia.

Stepping In

Marriage requires that a couple blend a host of personal habits, needs and expectancies. Lifestyles, values, and attitudes must be meshed, in order for the new family unity to become functional and supportive. For the stepfamily, this task may be more complex due to the number of people involved and their extended family histories.

A stepfamily is defined as a family in which at least one adult has a child prior to the couple's marriage. The children, who predate the current marriage, may live with the couple, visit periodically, or hold membership jointly in two households. Stepfamilies vary as to the living arrangements of their children, and they experience a variety of visitation schedules in the sharing of children across family units.

It is estimated that 25 million adults are stepparents with more than 10 million others attempting to prepare for such an arrangement. Fifteen million children under age 18 are stepchildren, and it is predicted that by 1990, 1 in 6 children will live in step. Statistically, we can no longer think of this family unit as atypical in the American culture.

Although the number of such families reflects that many adults view it as an acceptable option, little research has

been conducted to investigate the nature of the stepfamily; its boundaries, structures, and roles. Most of the literature reflects cultural values projecting the stepfamily as less than ideal. Many authors consider it a deviant family form, listing it with foster care homes and group living arrangements. The bias is evident in professional's choice of alternative names, such as "reorganized," "reconstituted," "blended," "restructured" for these families to avoid the "step" label. Step connotes second class status.

Although remarriage has often been viewed as the solution to problems brought about by death of a parent, divorce, or single parenting, it has not yet achieved status as a legitimate family form in its own right. The ideal family is still considered to be the first marriage family. Some religious groups sanction only this family form and most religious groups do not fully support alternative choices.

In order to achieve full status, traditions must reflect change. Rituals surrounding holidays, family gatherings, and other important occasions must make room for extended family members and friends from the multiple households of which the children are members. Schools and social groups must be able to tolerate stepparents as part of the parent circle. Media must give credibility through appropriate role models to steprelationships.

The stepfamily cannot presume to be identical to the first marriage family; there are several important differences; as cited by Visher & Visher (1978):

1. a parent-child relationship predates the marriage
2. one parent lives elsewhere or is deceased
3. children are often members of two households
4. most stepfamily members have experienced loss of previous family members
5. no legal relationship exists between stepparent and child

To accommodate these differences, the roles taken by family members, the routines arranged, and the expectations usually change. Families find the boundaries and roles not as well defined, and the patterns of living not as simple as previously experienced. Thus, the stepfamily is described as more self-conscious and less spontaneous, ever-questioning as to what is right and wrong, in their routine of living.

Professionals have disagreed about the quality of stepfamily experiences. Some authors have implied that children living in step experience more problems than those living in single parent homes. Feelings of guilt and resentment have been said to be common in the stepfamily unit.

Others have found that stepchildren are as well adjusted as children of intact families. Stepchildren have not been found to be more proned to juvenile delinquency or mental illness. Duberman's (1973) research showed that stepkin rated their relationships as satisfying. For some, the new family offers opportunities for increased personal growth and caring and allows more meaningful interaction.

Thus, research is not conclusive as to the expected outcome of this new type of family structure. Due to limited tradition, establishing a viable unit may involve more tasks than evident in first marriage families. Some of these tasks

appear to be critical for the stepfamily in accomplishing a satisfactory level of functioning.

1. Finding realistic, appropriate role models: Although adults may replace mates, parents are not replaceable. The stepparent does not replace the parent, and comparing the stepparent role with the parent role may not be justified. Good stepparenting may not be analogous to good parenting. The roles must be negotiated within the new family structure.

2. Redefining financial and social obligations: Support for children traverses marriage lines, and resource distribution needs re-examination. It has been found that resentment over support is a major issue for both mother and stepmother.

Financial problems are the second most cited reason for divorce of remarried couples when children are involved.

3. Arranging custody and visitation patterns: Conflict between parents may reflect continued struggles of the former marriage and joint parenting outside of marriage is ripe for battle engagements. Allowing the child meaningful time with both parents requires logistic planning, flexibility and continuous, open communication across households.

4. Establishing consistent leadership for younger members: The unit's boundaries of authority are permeable, and the structure, perhaps, less enmeshed than typical of the nuclear, intact family. Discipline and value questions need examination in this multiple parenting situation, since multiple household caretakers are likely to differ in value orientation more so than caretakers residing together.

5. Dispelling myths and tempering idealism: Remarriage does not automatically erase the hurt of divorce or death, love for stepchildren is not instant, and the "super parent" image wears thin. Strong relationships require the resources of time and patience, which do not come easily to newly blended units.

6. Forming emotional bonds necessary for a functional family support system. More bonds are expected within the multiple households and the ability to achieve all these relationships may require more adaptability than expected of intact family members. Psychologists assume that the degree to which persons feel secure is determined in part by the responsiveness of their principal attachment figures.

The critical job of the stepfamily is to establish a new pattern of family relationships. One that will allow the children to maintain frequent and positive interaction with the natural parents and relatives while strengthening the foundation of the new family unit. Conflict and mistrust among the members appear to diminish the member's ability to adapt to needed changes, thus reducing the chance of accomplishing the complex task. Currently little is actually known about healthy stepfamily functioning, and therefore, few guidelines are available for assisting stepfamily transitions.

Future research efforts will focus undoubtedly upon the following questions:

1. What are appropriate roles for stepparents?

2. What is the typical stepfamily life cycle?
3. Do stepparent-child bonds differ in quality from natural parent-child bonds?
4. What factors relate to satisfying stepfamily relationships?
5. How does equal access of both parents to the child affect the child's level of development.

The Finale

Families evolve from former family constellations, as units are disrupted by the departure of individuals and are reorganized to accommodate existing and new members. Those who study the family and its effects on new generations must beware of imposing rigid standards on a support unit which varies in form and circumstance.

Barnhill (1979) identified critical dimensions of healthy family functioning as:

1) individualization vs. enmeshment;
2) mutuality vs. isolation;
3) flexibility vs. rigidity;
4) stability vs. disorganization;
5) clear vs. breached generational boundaries; and
6) clear vs. conflicted roles.

Olson (1979) proposes that a balanced level of cohesion and adaptability is the key to functional family development. Fisher and Sprenkle (1978) suggest that family members need to feel valued, supported, and safe, and that the family must maintain the ability to communicate and negotiate individual differences.

How do the divorced, single, and stepfamilies measure up to these criteria. Comparing family units to such criteria seems more useful to our understanding of family dynamics than comparing all forms to the traditional family unit, as has been our precedent. Families evolve and change to accommodate needs of their members. The nuclear, intact family was the form found most useful for a period of time during the mid 1900's for the white middle class. Cultural changes have precipitated changes in family form and these forms are no longer deviant or atypical; they are viable choices.

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